

A YELLOW WAGTAIL *MOTACILLA FLAVA* AT LAKE MCLARTY

By JACK HUNT

46 Willowmead Way, Kelmscott, Western Australia, 6111

and IAN STANDRING

116 Virgil Avenue., Yokine, Western Australia, 6060

SUMMARY

A Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava* was seen at Lake McLarty on 29 December 1993. This is the fifth known record in the south of WA, although the species is regularly recorded in the north of the State. The bird has been tentatively identified as belonging to the race *simillima*.

BACKGROUND

On Wednesday 29 December at about 1130 hrs, after having watched various wader species in the south-east corner and eastern side of Lake McLarty (32°42'S/115°43'E), approximately 17km south-west of Pinjarra, the attention of one of us (JH) was drawn to a bird which had flown down onto the ground some 50m in front of us. Through binoculars, it was quickly apparent by its yellow underparts, habit of briskly wagging its tail up and down and general shape that it was a *Motacilla* wagtail. A description was compiled and a drawing (by JH) made of the bird. The bird was identified as a Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava*.

The bird was viewed for approxi-

mately 1 1/4 hours between 1130 and 1400hrs. Optical aids used were 8x30 Carl Zeiss Jena and 8x40 Opticron binoculars and Bushnell Spacemaster 22WA x 60 and Nikon ED 15-45 x 60 telescopes at distances between 10 and 60m. The weather was fine, sunny and mild to warm.

HABITS

The bird was first seen flying in to land on dry mud, it walked and ran along, occasionally dashing at something. Its tail wagged up and down constantly. It once picked up a small piece (c. 2cm x 1cm) of dried plant material. It was seen along the muddy shoreline and at the water's edge and a few times was seen to pick up small items (food – insects?) when dashing about. It was also seen on the adjacent dry surrounds which had areas of short scattered grass where it preened once. The bird was hard to approach out in the open and when flushed was difficult to follow in the air as its flight was swift and strongly undulating. When flushed, it flew 150m away but we did not see it land and we did not relocate it until after lunch. At other times, it flew

30–40m away. We were once able to get to within about 10m when we approached from behind some *Melaleuca* sp. about 2m tall and once within 20–30m when we approached from the water in an endeavour to have the sun behind us. It was otherwise difficult to approach closer than 30–50m. The bird needed careful observation on the ground because at times it could not be seen immediately after having moved short distances. It was once chased for several seconds by a Willie Wagtail.

DESCRIPTION

Upperparts: Grey crown shading to olive-brown mantle, back and scapulars. At certain angles, the olive tinge was more obvious. Once when viewed from directly behind, the upper rump appeared a shade greener (olive green) than the olive-brown upperparts. Ear-coverts grey, darker than crown. From front on, it appeared to have a dark patch around the eye, but this was in fact the grey ear-coverts. Long buff supercilium reached to rear of ear-coverts. Primaries, secondaries, tertials and wing coverts dark brown. Wing coverts very finely fringed buff, the tips forming two fine wing bars but this was only visible through the telescopes. Leading edge of tertials pale. Tail long, very dark brown above with white outer tail feathers, latter not obvious at first.

Underparts: Throat whitish shading to lemon yellow breast then strongly yellow lower abdomen and undertail coverts. Across the upper breast adjacent to the carpal bend, a broad cloudy indistinct dusky

band, wider at the sides of the breast. When preening, flanks under closed wing revealed as buff or very pale lemon.

Legs: Very dark grey but at certain angles when the sun fell on the legs, appeared dark brown.

Call: When flushed uttered a “zwit” call, not strong but fairly sharp.

Flight: Swift and strongly undulating. Cramp (1988) and Viney & Phillipps (1983) describe the flight as bounding. When flushed, it flew fairly high and rapidly overhead (10–20m up), while calling. Flying away from us, the bird looked thin and generally dark, with no contrast between the rump and back. No wing bars were noticed. The bird was not easy to keep in view.

IDENTIFICATION

Motacilla wagtails showing the general combination of characters described above are Citrine Wagtail *Motacilla citreola*, Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea* and Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava*.

Motacilla citreola has grey rather than olive-brown upperparts. In addition, the dusky ear-coverts of the non-breeding male and the female are isolated in the yellow of the forehead, supercilium, sides of head and underparts (see e.g. Slater 1986). *Motacilla cinerea* has grey upperparts, a contrasting yellow rump and pale brown legs. A narrow white wing band (base of secondaries) is conspicuous in flight (King *et al.* 1978).

The combination of grey crown, long buff supercilium, olive-brown

upperparts with similar coloured rump, lack of any noticeable wing bar in flight, dark legs and call of 'zwit' identifies our bird as a Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava*. Judging from plumage colouration and time of year the bird appeared to be an adult in non-breeding plumage, although it is possible the bird was in transitional plumage given the amount of yellow on the underparts.

An attempt was made to identify the subspecific status of the bird as this may help in an understanding of the movement of the various races. The Yellow Wagtail is, however, a bird of vast complexity in systematics and morphology (Cramp 1988). Geographic variation within this species is very irregular with similar populations occurring in very widely separated regions, such as nominate *flava* in Europe and *simillima* in far eastern Siberia, while other subspecies intergrade and are merely points along a cline (Johnstone 1982). In addition, integration between many, sometimes sharply differentiated, forms has produced variable hybrids. There are also the problems associated with sex, age, wear, condition of moult and individual variation (Johnstone 1982). Intermediate stages between immature and adult are often seen (King *et al.* 1978).

The combination of features (grey crown, olive-brown upperparts, long buff supercilium) would suggest the bird belonged to the race *simillima* which is the main visitor to eastern Indonesia (Johnstone pers. comm.) The similar nominate *flava* from Europe is unlikely to find its way to Australia. Details of some

races e.g Asian have not, however, been found in available literature.

OTHER SIGHTINGS IN SOUTHERN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

The Yellow Wagtail is now a regular summer visitor to northern Australia (Johnstone 1982). In Western Australia, the bird has been recorded in the Kimberley and North West. South of the tropic, one was seen in Carnarvon on 16 February 1991 (Shannon 1991) and presumably the same bird there on 24 February 1991 (Hill and Hill 1991).

In the south of Western Australia, there have been four previous sightings of the Yellow Wagtail. One was observed at Herdsman Lake (Perth) on 28 February 1981 and 8 March 1981 by Peter Curry (Storr and Johnstone 1988). Another was seen at freshwater swamp at Wilson Inlet [near Denmark] for nine days in early May 1983 by L. Broadhurst (Storr 1991). On 8 August 1984, a male was seen by Nick Dymond on seaweed banks to the east of the Eyre observatory and it remained there until 15 August (Dymond 1984). Another was briefly viewed at Lake Claremont (Perth) in January 1987 (Tom Delaney pers. comm.).

It is likely that the presence of the Yellow Wagtail in the south-west is under recorded. There are relatively few birdwatchers in the south-west and observers at Lake McLarty the previous day (28 December) did not see the bird, nor did other observers (including us) on several days subsequently, although most were made aware of the bird's presence. It

is possible that this bird was on passage or was very mobile and did not stay at the lake for more than a few hours or a day and that this sighting was therefore pure chance.

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